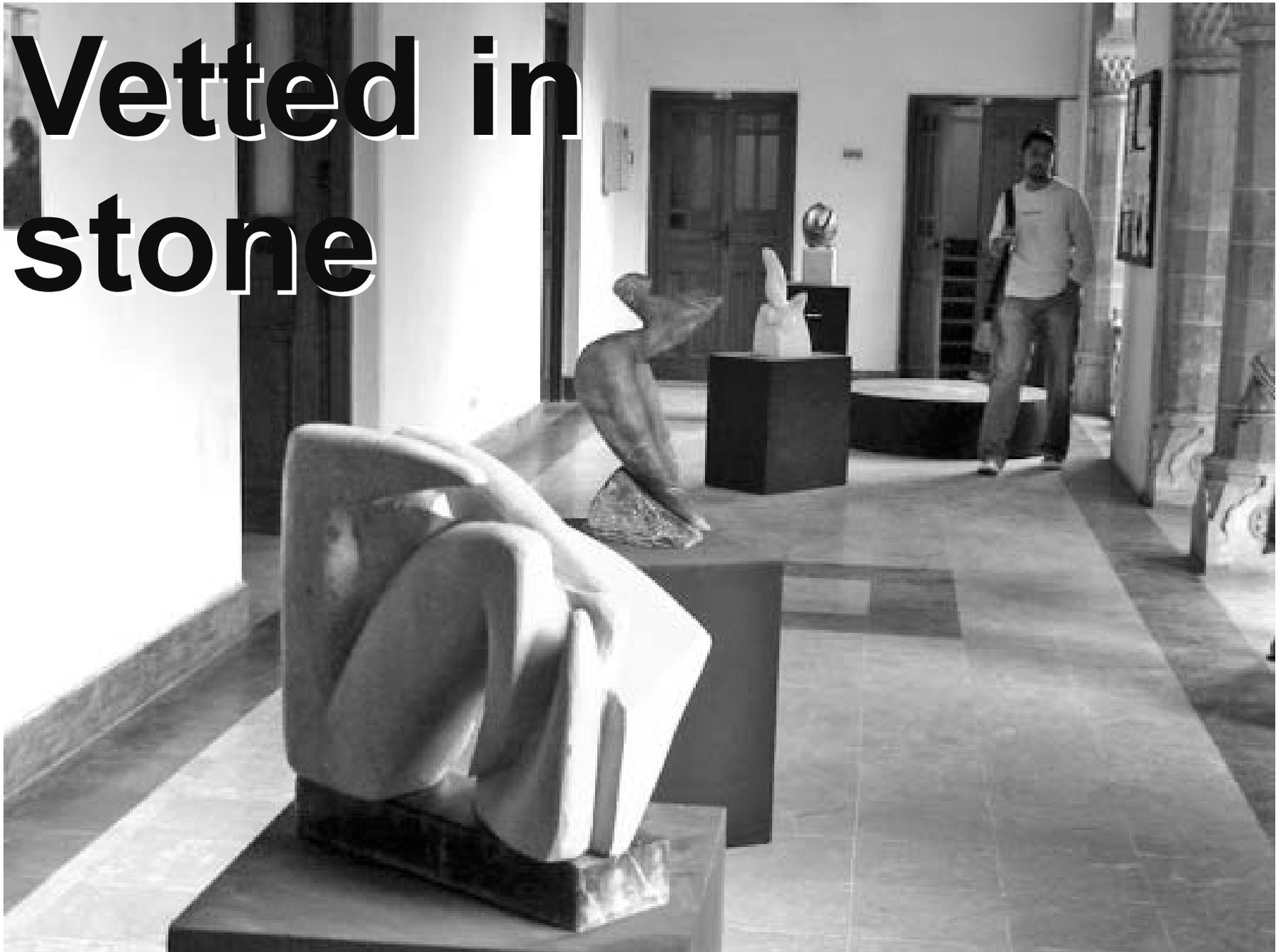


Vetted in stone



Sadaf Halai

The sculptor Anjum Ayaz speaks of the writer Saadat Hasan Manto with something close to reverence. “When I read Manto for the first time, as a young boy in Lahore,” he says, sitting on the edge of his seat, “I couldn’t eat for three days. But of course, the Lahore I grew up in, with its coffee houses, no longer exists,” he adds, looking at the outline of the Hindu Gymkhana in Karachi.

Anjum Ayaz, who describes himself as a “low-profile person,” has been quietly chiselling away at stone for the last thirty years. Last month, several of Ayaz’s stone and metal sculptures were stolen from Seaview. In 2004, they were installed along the esplanades at Sea View as part of the Defence Housing Authority’s (DHA) “beautification plan.” The DHA, which had previously removed one of the sculptures to create parking space, blamed the theft on “the weather and [the] public’s insensitivity.” The absurdity of it all was worthy of a Manto short story. No one, except for Ayaz, seemed unduly worried about the theft.

When I ask Ayaz about the role of art, “in the public domain . . . outside and accessible to all,” in a society where access to “high art” is inextricably limited to a small minority, he looks visibly upset. Art, he says, should not be confined to air-conditioned galleries, which he calls “shops” with considerable disdain. Art should not exist solely in an exclusive, elitist domain, he says.

On March 17, a two-day exhibition of Ayaz’s sculptures was held at the National Academy of Performing Arts (NAPA), where he teaches experimental theatre. It was free and open to the public and show-

**“The public life of objects”
Anjum Ayaz
March 17-18
NAPA
Karachi**

cased 21 sculptures. The response was lukewarm. “I’m packing this up tomorrow,” he told me on Sunday evening, nodding his head in the direction of his sculptures. “I’m taking the whole exhibition to Holland around the 25th,” he added, “It’s showing at The Hague.”

Ayaz’s work is displayed in open spaces all over the world: a stone sculpture at the Azabu Shopping Centre, Tokyo; an 18 foot high marble sculpture in China, and a 20 foot high metallic sculpture called “Peace” at Shahr-e-Faisal. He has been commissioned to make a 20 foot high sculpture for Beijing’s city centre in preparation for the 2008 Olympics. “I no longer show my work in galleries,” he says. “I want to work for the people.”

Later, I caught up with Anjum for a chat.

Sadaf Halai: Who are your influences?

Anjum Ayaz: Sadeqain, more than anyone else. When I used to paint, I lived with Sadeqain. But I had to leave him and I had to leave painting. I was young when I started working with him, and I had to somehow shrug off his influence and find my own way. That’s when I started making sculpture.

SH: You seem very committed to this

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notion of "working for the people"

AA: I'll tell you what I'm committed to. I have a sculpture in Tokyo and walking by it I've seen old Japanese men standing silently before it like this. *[He jumps out of his chair and grasps his hands together in front of him, bowing slightly.]* One of my sculptures, a 60 foot structure in stone, will be placed at the Korangi bypass. Yes, I am committed to working for people because I want them to be able to *see* my work, instead of reading about it. Talking about art is meaningless if the art in question is only for the enjoyment and pleasure of a limited circle of people.

SH: And how is your work received in Pakistan?

AA: I don't think people here can relate to sculpture and the three-dimensional form, which to me is absurd. The Dancing Girl from Moenjodaro is the most contemporary form of art! More than two thousand years ago, marvellous, real forms were made in Taxila. There was an unbelievable variety of work! And yet we seem incapable of owning this work, even though it is who we are. We come from this glorious past – it is ours – but we can't relate to the ground we're standing on.

SH: Can most people relate to contemporary Pakistani sculpture?

AA: No they can't, but it's not entirely their fault. Sculpture is not given any importance in our country. This is because of our own deep-seated reservations and biases. People believe that making these objects is wrong, but who's asking you to worship them? And there are no shortcuts in this medium. What is a young man with no money in his pocket going to do when he's faced by that monolith of stone? He'll want to break his head open against it. There is an undeniable hypocrisy at work here. The work I'm showing here at NAPA is not highly figurative. It is simplified. The human form is largely absent. And yet, these insincere, effortless TV productions that are churned out every day at such alarming speed, are considered both acceptable and desirable!

SH: But how does someone with no prior knowledge of art respond to modern sculpture?

AA: One of my sculptures is installed on Jail Road in Lahore. I saw a young man, who could barely speak Urdu, let alone English,



standing on the road and watching it intently. I asked him what he thought of it, and I loved what he said. 'I don't understand it,' he replied, 'but I know I like looking at it.' All that matters, ultimately, is such a pure response to a visual experience. I find that boy's sentiment more honest than the gibberish of the pseudo-intellectuals at art galleries. An official from the Karachi Port Trust will ask me what my installation at Schön Circle means. It is what it is! The people who scoff at the public art in their own city will be tantalised by the same work if they see it in New York! The way they would perceive it would be completely different.

But here, in their own environment, they want to question what the sculpture means and wonder what it's doing in the middle of the street! This is a problem, and it has to do with the way we look at our own world.

SH: What do you mean by that?

AA: What I mean is that we have to move beyond the boundaries of the only symbols we feel comfortable with and can relate to. What are these symbols? The camel, the sun and the moon, and the sword! It all seems to begin and end with those points of reference. I am sick of these images, and I have to move beyond them. I can't hang onto these archaic forms forever. A lot is happening and chang-

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ing in the world. If we remain this obstinate, we'll be left behind forever.

SH: Don't you think that between NAPA, Indus Valley and National College of Arts the commitment to the arts has grown in recent years?

AA: Of course it has. We have masters to look up to: Ahmed Pervaiz, Jamil Naqsh, Bashir Mirza. They laid down parameters for excellence. But artists should not shirk away from work. This new culture of instant gratification and shortcuts is terribly detrimental to our collective psyche. How long does it take to put together one of these new TV productions? Art and artists are not made overnight. There is a new musician "discovered" everyday. These kids and *londay* at their concerts: how long will they last? How long can you watch a third rate programme? I teach theatre art at NAPA. I am a huge admirer of Manto. Both sculpture and theatre are very dangerous. After you've acted in great play, you're finished for a while. That's what it can, and should, take out of your psychic reserves. Try throwing someone into Samuel Beckett, Tennessee Williams and Manto. I'd like to see how long he'll be able to watch his third-rate TV drama. Look at those students over there (*pointing to some NAPA students*). They're here, on a Sunday evening, on a holiday. Why? Because they possess the drive to make real art. ■

Sadaf Halai is Staff Writer at The Friday Times

